

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN DIGITAL MARKETING: GENERATION Z'S RECEPTION ANALYSIS OF FASHION AFFILIATE CONTENT ON SHOPEE

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Abstract. Technological advancements have continuously created innovations that make human life more efficient. Artificial Intelligence (AI), which was initially developed to assist humans in performing everyday tasks, has increasingly expanded into digital marketing, particularly through the emergence of AI-generated affiliate content used to promote fashion products on the Shopee e-commerce platform. This study aims to examine how Generation Z, as digital natives with a high level of digital literacy, receives and interprets the use of AI in promotional content. Employing a qualitative approach and Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis theory, this study explores how Generation Z's interpretations can be categorized into three audience positions: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with five Generation Z informants. The findings reveal that although AI has introduced significant innovations and enhanced efficiency across various aspects of daily life, its application in digital promotional content has received criticism due to its perceived lack of authenticity. The characteristics of fashion products, which require detailed and accurate representations of texture, color, and size, make AI-generated virtual models unable to fully replace the representational role of real human models. Consequently, the findings indicate that none of the informants occupied the dominant-hegemonic position.

Keywords: Affiliator, Reception Analysis, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Generation Z, Fashion Products on Shopee

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has significantly transformed various aspects of human life, including marketing communication. One of the most rapidly advancing innovations is Artificial Intelligence (AI), which is no longer used solely to improve productivity and operational efficiency but has also been increasingly applied in digital content production. Within the e-commerce industry, AI contributes to creating more personalized user experiences through recommendation systems, chatbots, visual search, and automated promotional content generation. These developments have encouraged the emergence of new marketing practices, including the use of AI by affiliate marketers to produce promotional content more quickly, attractively, and efficiently.

As one of the e-commerce platforms with the largest user base in Indonesia, Shopee demonstrates the growing adoption of AI in digital marketing activities. Through its affiliate marketing program, affiliate marketers are able to promote products using video content uploaded to Shopee Video and other social media

platforms. Currently, some affiliate marketers have begun utilizing AI to generate product visuals, virtual models, narratives, and automated video editing. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in fashion product promotions, as this category relies heavily on visual appeal to attract potential consumers. On the one hand, AI offers several advantages, including greater time efficiency, lower production costs, and improved visual quality. On the other hand, its use also raises concerns regarding content authenticity, information transparency, product representation, and marketing communication ethics, as AI-generated visuals may not accurately reflect the actual condition of the promoted products.

Previous studies have examined the use of Artificial Intelligence in digital marketing. Huang and Rust (2021) explained that AI can improve the effectiveness of marketing strategies through the automation of creative processes and content personalization. Dwivedi et al. (2021) similarly argued that AI creates new opportunities for producing digital content that is more efficient and adaptive to market demands. In the context of User-Generated Content (UGC), Reyes-Menendez et al. (2019) found that user-created content tends to generate higher levels of trust than conventional advertising. Meanwhile, Lou and Yuan (2019) revealed that authenticity is an important factor influencing the credibility of promotional content on digital media. Other studies have also highlighted that AI use may create a gap between visual representations and the actual condition of products, which may subsequently affect consumer trust (Javornik, 2016).

Nevertheless, most previous studies have primarily focused on the effectiveness of AI in marketing, technology acceptance, or the general influence of AI on consumer behavior. Research specifically addressing how audiences interpret AI-based promotional content for fashion products created by affiliate marketers remains limited. Moreover, studies on the use of AI in affiliate marketing have generally adopted consumer behavior or information technology perspectives, while relatively few have examined this phenomenon from the perspective of Communication Studies, particularly through reception analysis. In fact, the meaning received by an audience as the message recipient does not always correspond to the meaning constructed by the message creator. Differences in experience, knowledge, digital literacy, and personal values may result in diverse interpretations of AI-generated content.

This research gap is increasingly important because Generation Z represents a group of digital natives characterized by intensive use of digital media and e-commerce platforms, as well as relatively high levels of digital literacy compared with previous generations. This generation is not only a primary target of digital marketing but also possesses the ability to recognize the characteristics of AI-generated content and evaluate its level of authenticity. Therefore, it is important to understand how Generation Z receives, interprets, and constructs meaning regarding the use of AI in promotional content created by affiliate marketers. Their interpretations may involve accepting such innovation as a new form of creativity, negotiating the authenticity of the content, or rejecting it because it is perceived to reduce the credibility of product information.

Based on the preceding discussion, the novelty of this study lies in its focus on Generation Z's reception of AI-based promotional video content for fashion products created by affiliate marketers on the Shopee platform using Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis approach. This study does not merely examine AI as a marketing technology but also seeks to understand the process through which audiences construct meaning in response to AI-generated promotional content. This approach offers a new perspective compared with previous studies that have largely emphasized technological effectiveness or consumers' purchase intentions. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze Generation Z's reception of AI-based promotional video content for fashion products created by affiliate marketers on Shopee. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of digital communication, marketing communication, and reception analysis studies in understanding audience responses to the use of AI in digital marketing practices.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis theory, which conceptualizes audiences as active participants in constructing the meaning of media messages. Through the encoding–decoding model, Hall (1980) argues that messages produced by communicators (encoding) are not necessarily interpreted by audiences in the intended manner because the decoding process is influenced by each audience member's experiences, knowledge, values, cultural background, and social context. Consequently, the same message may generate different meanings across individuals. Hall categorizes audience interpretations into three reading positions. The first is the dominant-hegemonic position, in which audiences accept the intended meaning encoded by the message producer. The second is the negotiated position, in which audiences partially accept the intended meaning while adapting it according to their own experiences and perspectives. The third is the oppositional position, in which audiences reject the preferred meaning and construct their own alternative interpretation. This theoretical framework serves as the primary foundation for analyzing how Generation Z interprets AI-based promotional video content for fashion products created by affiliate marketers on the Shopee platform.

Within the context of digital marketing communication, this study is further supported by the concepts of User-Generated Content (UGC) and one of its prominent forms, affiliate marketing. UGC refers to content created by individuals who are users of a product or service and is generally perceived as more authentic, credible, and influential in shaping consumer perceptions and purchase decisions than conventional advertising (Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Solomon & Tuten, 2017). One form of UGC that has become increasingly prevalent on e-commerce platforms is content produced by affiliate marketers. Affiliate marketers act as communicators by promoting products through digital content, including photographs and videos, in exchange for commissions generated from consumer transactions. Affiliate-generated content possesses distinctive characteristics because it occupies a position between organic and commercial content, making audience perceptions of message credibility and authenticity particularly important areas of investigation.

The advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has also transformed digital marketing communication practices. AI enables the automated creation of promotional texts, images, and videos through technologies such as generative AI, virtual models, background replacement, and algorithm-driven visual editing. According to Huang and Rust (2021), AI significantly improves content production efficiency while enabling more effective marketing personalization. However, the adoption of AI also raises concerns regarding authenticity, visual manipulation, transparency, and the potential discrepancy between product representations and actual product conditions (Javornik, 2016; Floridi et al., 2018). Therefore, the use of AI in promotional content should not merely be viewed as a technological innovation but also as a communication phenomenon that gives rise to multiple audience interpretations.

This phenomenon is particularly relevant within the e-commerce environment, especially on Shopee. As the e-commerce platform with the largest user base in Indonesia, Shopee offers various features, including Shopee Video, Shopee Live, and an affiliate marketing program that has accelerated the proliferation of video-based promotional content. Fashion is among the platform's most popular product categories, making visual presentation a crucial factor in attracting potential consumers. This situation has encouraged an increasing number of affiliate marketers to utilize AI to create more visually and verbally appealing promotional content. At the same time, however, it raises important questions regarding how audiences perceive the authenticity, credibility, and ethical implications of using AI in marketing communication.

This study specifically focuses on Generation Z as its research subject. Generation Z represents a group of digital natives characterized by high levels of digital literacy, frequent engagement with social media and e-commerce platforms, and a tendency to critically evaluate information before making decisions (Prensky, 2001; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). These characteristics make Generation Z particularly capable of recognizing AI-generated promotional content while simultaneously constructing diverse interpretations of the messages conveyed. Consequently, the reception analysis approach is highly relevant for understanding how Generation Z accepts, negotiates, or rejects the meanings constructed through AI-based promotional content.

Previous studies indicate that research on AI in marketing communication has largely concentrated on technological effectiveness, the commodification of AI, and its influence on consumer behavior. Puri et al. (2023) examined the commodification of Artificial Intelligence in the creative advertising industry using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach and found that AI enhances the visual appeal of advertisements, although it has not yet become a fully effective commercial commodity within the advertising sector. Subsequently, Andreas et al. (2025) employed Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis to investigate Generation Z's reception of news coverage concerning DeepSeek AI published by Tempo.co. Their findings revealed that Generation Z tended to accept, negotiate, and critically evaluate AI-related news based on their individual experiences and knowledge. Meanwhile, Simanjuntak and Chaniago (2025) demonstrated that Artificial Intelligence and advertising

personalization positively influence Generation Z's purchasing behavior on e-commerce platforms, although their study adopted a quantitative approach emphasizing relationships among variables.

Based on these previous studies, a significant research gap remains. Existing research has not specifically examined how Generation Z interprets AI-based promotional video content for fashion products created by affiliate marketers on the Shopee platform. Furthermore, most previous studies have primarily emphasized the effectiveness of AI or consumer purchasing behavior rather than the audience's meaning-making process. Therefore, this study offers a novel contribution by employing Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis to examine Generation Z's responses to and interpretations of AI-generated affiliate marketing content for fashion products on Shopee. This approach is expected to contribute to the advancement of digital communication, marketing communication, and scholarship examining the relationship between the development of Artificial Intelligence and audience meaning-making processes within the e-commerce ecosystem.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a reception analysis design grounded in the constructivist paradigm. This approach was selected because the study aims to understand how Generation Z constructs meaning from Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based promotional video content for fashion products created by affiliate marketers on the Shopee platform. The reception analysis is based on Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model, which conceptualizes audiences as active interpreters of media messages through three reading positions: the dominant-hegemonic position, the negotiated position, and the oppositional position. Accordingly, the focus of this study is not on measuring relationships among variables but rather on examining the meaning-making process based on the informants' experiences, knowledge, and personal backgrounds.

The participants in this study consisted of Generation Z individuals aged 18–28 years who were active Shopee users and had previously viewed fashion-related affiliate marketing content. Furthermore, participants were required to be able to distinguish AI-generated affiliate content from non-AI (organic) content. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on predetermined criteria. A screening questionnaire distributed through Google Forms was used to identify eligible participants. This screening process ensured that the selected informants possessed relevant experiences and sufficient understanding of the research phenomenon, enabling them to provide rich and in-depth information consistent with the objectives of the study.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, documentation, and a literature review. In-depth interviews served as the primary source of data for exploring the informants' experiences, perspectives, and interpretations of AI-generated affiliate marketing content. Documentation, including screenshots of AI-generated promotional content, interview records, and photographs with the informants, was used to support and strengthen the research findings. The literature review provided the theoretical foundation for interpreting the empirical findings.

The primary research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed based on concepts of AI-generated affiliate content in marketing communication, the characteristics of affiliate-generated content, and Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis theory. The adequacy of the instrument was established by formulating interview indicators derived from relevant theoretical frameworks to ensure alignment with the research objectives.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1984), which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Interview data were first reduced by selecting information relevant to the research focus and were subsequently organized into systematic narrative descriptions to facilitate interpretation. In the final stage, conclusions were drawn by identifying recurring patterns of meaning constructed by the informants. These patterns were then categorized into the dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional positions according to Stuart Hall's reception analysis model.

The analytical framework employed in this study was based on Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model. Within this framework, AI-based promotional video content for fashion products created by affiliate marketers was positioned as the encoded message, while Generation Z Shopee users acted as the audience responsible for decoding and interpreting the message. This interpretive process may result in three possible reception positions. The dominant-hegemonic position occurs when audiences accept the meaning intended by the content creator. The negotiated position emerges when audiences accept certain aspects of the message while adapting them to their own experiences and perspectives. The oppositional position occurs when audiences reject the dominant meaning and construct an alternative interpretation. These three reception positions provide the analytical foundation for explaining how Generation Z interprets the use of Artificial Intelligence in affiliate marketing content promoting fashion products on the Shopee platform.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data Collection Process

This study was conducted from May to June 2026 using a qualitative approach through **in-depth interviews** with five Generation Z informants who met the established research criteria. The participants were between 18 and 28 years of age, active Shopee users, had previously viewed fashion affiliate video content, and were able to distinguish Artificial Intelligence (AI)-generated content from non-AI (organic) content. All informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique through a screening questionnaire distributed via Google Forms across several social media platforms, including WhatsApp, Threads, and X, ensuring that the collected data aligned with the research objectives. The in-depth interviews were conducted both face-to-face (offline) and online through Google Meet, Zoom, or WhatsApp calls to explore Generation Z's perspectives and reception of AI-generated affiliate content in greater depth. Informants who met the selection criteria and provided responses consistent with the research objectives during the screening process were subsequently invited to participate in the interview stage.

Following the completion of the in-depth interviews, which consisted of 24 questions examining Generation Z's reception of AI-generated affiliate content for fashion products on Shopee, the collected data were analyzed. To facilitate the analytical process, the interview findings were organized into several major themes.

Informant Profile

To ensure the relevance and credibility of the data, the researchers established specific participant criteria through screening questions. Eligible informants were required to be members of Generation Z aged 18–28 years, active Shopee users, and individuals who had repeatedly encountered and were capable of distinguishing AI-generated affiliate content from organic affiliate content promoting fashion products on Shopee. Based on these criteria, five informants with diverse backgrounds were selected, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Informants

Informant	Age	Occupation	First Year Using Shopee
Informant 1	21	University Student	2018
Informant 2	25	Private-Sector Employee	2019
Informant 3	19	University Student	2022
Informant 4	21	University Student	2020
Informant 5	22	University Student	2020

Source: Primary Data Collected by the Researchers (2026).

All five informants were confirmed to be active Shopee users who had become familiar with the Shopee Affiliate phenomenon as the program gained widespread popularity. Their frequency of platform usage varied considerably. Informant 1 accessed Shopee approximately three times per week to browse products, transfer money using ShopeePay, and occasionally play Shopee's in-app games. Informant 2 used Shopee two to three times daily (approximately 20–50 times per month) to purchase electronic components, order food through ShopeeFood, and search for fashion products. Meanwhile, Informants 3, 4, and 5 accessed the application almost every day to browse products, explore current fashion trends, and search for clothing inspiration.

Generation Z's Assessment of the Credibility and Authenticity of AI-Generated Content

The findings indicate that credibility is the primary factor shaping Generation Z's acceptance of AI-generated affiliate content. All informants agreed that promotional video content plays a crucial role in evaluating fashion products before making purchasing decisions on Shopee. Through videos, consumers are able to obtain more detailed information regarding product shape, size, color, texture, and usage than can be obtained from product photographs or textual descriptions alone. Consequently, visual quality and the authenticity of the information become essential factors in establishing trust toward promotional content.

Informants 1, 3, and 4 stated that review videos provide a more realistic representation of product conditions than product descriptions or catalog images. According to these participants, videos enable consumers to better visualize how products would appear in everyday use. Informant 2 further explained that affiliate marketers are capable of reaching broader audiences while providing more comprehensive product reviews than official promotional content produced by sellers. Meanwhile, Informant 5 emphasized that review videos help reduce consumer disappointment arising from discrepancies between catalog images and the products ultimately received. These findings suggest that affiliate marketers have generally established a relatively high level of credibility among Generation Z. However, this perceived credibility changes when AI becomes heavily involved in the content production process. All informants believed that AI-generated content reduces visual authenticity, thereby diminishing trust in the promotional message.

These findings reinforce the concept of User-Generated Content (UGC) proposed by Morrison et al. (2013), which argues that user-created content is perceived as more trustworthy because it reflects genuine user experiences and appears less formal than conventional advertising. Within the context of affiliate marketing, although affiliate-generated content serves commercial purposes, audiences still expect it to maintain the authenticity traditionally associated with UGC. Consistent with Lou and Yuan (2019), affiliate credibility is largely constructed through audience perceptions of honesty, firsthand product experience, and the ability to present information realistically. Consequently, when content production becomes increasingly dominated by Artificial Intelligence, audiences perceive a reduction in authentic human experience, leading to a corresponding decline in the credibility of promotional content.

Informants 1, 2, 3, and 4 perceived AI-generated visuals as overly perfect, unnatural, and incapable of accurately portraying the actual condition of products. They argued that AI tends to eliminate product imperfections, producing visual representations that do not accurately reflect reality. Informant 1 even reported immediately skipping AI-generated promotional videos because the displayed visuals no longer represented the product's true appearance. In contrast, Informant 5 adopted a more moderate perspective, suggesting that AI remains acceptable when used solely as a supporting tool for visual editing, such as adjusting lighting or removing backgrounds, provided that it does not alter the product's original appearance.

These findings indicate that although Artificial Intelligence improves the efficiency of promotional content production, it has not yet replaced consumers' demand for authentic product representation. All informants agreed that AI-generated visuals tend to appear excessively polished, less realistic, and insufficiently capable of accurately portraying the characteristics of fashion products. Consistent with the theoretical perspective on Artificial Intelligence in digital marketing, AI functions as a supporting technology that enhances marketing effectiveness rather than serving as a complete substitute for human interaction and authentic user experiences in building consumer trust.

These findings also align with the characteristics of Generation Z as digital natives possessing relatively high levels of digital literacy. According to Prensky (2001), Generation Z has grown up alongside technological advancements and is therefore accustomed to utilizing digital media as a primary source of information. This capability is further supported by Livingstone (2014), who argues that digital literacy encompasses not only the ability to access information but also the capacity to critically evaluate its credibility and quality. This characteristic was evident among all informants, who assessed not only the visual quality of promotional content but also the authenticity of product representation before trusting the promotional message. Accordingly, for Generation Z, advances in AI technology do not automatically enhance the credibility of promotional content when such technology simultaneously diminishes the authenticity that forms the foundation of consumer trust.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that, for Generation Z, credibility is determined not only by who delivers the message but also by how the message is produced. When AI is used to fully replace human representation, the perceived credibility of affiliate marketers tends to decline because audiences feel that authentic evidence regarding the actual product condition is lost. These findings are consistent with those of Sussman and Carter (2025), who argue that AI-mediated communication can alter audience perceptions of message authenticity, thereby influencing trust in the information source. The greater the degree of perceived artificiality within the content, the greater the likelihood that audiences will question the credibility of the promotional message.

Ultimately, authenticity remains the primary value sought by Generation Z when consuming promotional content for fashion products. Although AI offers greater production efficiency and visually appealing content, the informants consistently regarded genuine human experiences as the most trustworthy form of product representation. Therefore, within the context of affiliate marketing, AI-generated content has not yet been able to replace the authenticity that has long served as the foundation of credibility in digital promotional communication.

The Influence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on Consumer Trust and Purchase Decisions

Trust emerged as the primary factor influencing Generation Z's purchase decisions regarding fashion products on Shopee. All informants agreed that promotional video content plays a crucial role in helping them evaluate product quality before making a purchase. Through video content, prospective consumers can obtain detailed information about a product's color, size, texture, shape, and how it appears when used in real-life situations. Such information is considered effective in reducing the uncertainty commonly associated with online shopping, particularly for fashion products that cannot be physically examined before purchase. The findings revealed that all informants regarded product review videos as a more valuable source of information than catalog photographs or product descriptions. However, their level of trust in different information sources varied. Informants 1, 2, 4, and 5 expressed greater trust in affiliate-generated content than in official brand

advertisements because they perceived affiliate marketers as being more honest in sharing their product experiences. According to these participants, affiliate marketers are generally willing to highlight product shortcomings, compare products with competing alternatives, and present more realistic user experiences. In contrast, Informant 3 placed greater trust in official brand advertisements due to a previous negative purchasing experience based on an affiliate's recommendation. This experience led the informant to become more cautious, using affiliate content only as supplementary information before making a purchase decision.

These differences indicate that the credibility of information sources is shaped not only by the communication medium but also by each individual's consumption experiences. This finding is consistent with Lou and Yuan (2019), who demonstrated that the credibility of influencers and affiliate marketers significantly influences audience trust and purchase intentions. The greater consumers perceive an information source to be honest and trustworthy, the more likely they are to rely on that information when making purchasing decisions.

However, this level of trust changes when affiliate marketers begin incorporating Artificial Intelligence (AI) into their content production processes. All informants agreed that AI influences their perceptions of the authenticity of promotional information. Informants 1 through 5 consistently stated that AI-generated virtual models have not yet been able to authentically represent fashion products. They perceived AI-generated visuals as overly polished, less natural, and incapable of accurately portraying products as they would appear when worn or used by real people. As a result, these perceptions generated uncertainty regarding the quality of products promoted through AI-generated content.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that declining trust in AI-generated content directly affects consumers' purchase decisions. Informants 1, 2, 3, and 4 stated that once they recognized a promotional video as AI-generated, they became less interested in purchasing the product unless additional evidence was available, such as organic product videos, consumer reviews, or testimonials from actual users. Informants 1 and 4 even reported immediately skipping AI-generated promotional videos because they perceived such content as lacking effort, insufficiently honest, and potentially misleading to consumers who are unfamiliar with AI technology. In contrast, Informant 5 adopted a more moderate stance, explaining that AI-generated promotional content could still attract interest; however, the final purchasing decision would ultimately depend on reviews from other consumers and authentic user experiences.

These findings indicate that AI has not yet replaced the role of genuine human representation in establishing consumer trust toward fashion products. For Generation Z, purchase decisions are influenced not only by visually appealing content but also by perceptions of the authenticity of the information presented. When promotional visuals appear excessively synthetic or fail to accurately represent actual product conditions, trust in the promotional message declines, consequently reducing consumers' purchase intentions. These findings are consistent with Grigsby et al. (2025), who reported that the use of generative AI in advertising may decrease consumer trust when audiences recognize that visual representations do not reflect

the actual characteristics of the promoted products. Conversely, AI tends to be more readily accepted when it functions merely as a creative support tool without compromising product authenticity.

In addition to influencing trust in products, the findings also demonstrate that AI encourages Generation Z to adopt a more critical approach when consuming digital promotional content. All five informants emphasized the importance of distinguishing AI-generated content from organic content to avoid being influenced by manipulated visuals. Informant 2 stressed the need for critical thinking, particularly when purchasing products of significant economic value, whereas Informant 3 argued that the increasing misuse of AI requires consumers to exercise greater caution when evaluating promotional information. Meanwhile, Informants 1 and 4 suggested that AI-generated content with the potential to mislead consumers should be reported to the platform to prevent harm to other users.

These findings are consistent with the characteristics of Generation Z as digital natives possessing relatively high levels of digital literacy. According to Prensky (2001), Generation Z has grown alongside digital technological advancements, enabling them to effectively access and understand information distributed through digital media. This perspective is further supported by Livingstone's (2014) concept of digital literacy, which argues that digital competence involves not only accessing information but also critically evaluating its credibility and quality. This capability was clearly reflected in the attitudes of all informants, who did not immediately trust AI-generated promotional content but instead sought additional references through organic videos, consumer reviews, and testimonials before making purchasing decisions. Therefore, higher levels of digital literacy encourage Generation Z to become more selective consumers when responding to promotional messages within e-commerce platforms.

Moreover, these findings reinforce Stuart Hall's (1980) Reception Analysis theory, which conceptualizes audiences as active interpreters of media messages. Although affiliate marketers encode promotional messages through visually appealing AI-generated product representations, the informants did not necessarily accept these intended meanings. Their previous shopping experiences, knowledge of AI technology, and digital literacy skills influenced their decoding processes, resulting in different interpretations of the promotional content. Most informants occupied the negotiated position, acknowledging the benefits of AI as an innovative content creation tool while still requiring additional evidence before trusting the promotional message. Meanwhile, several informants demonstrated an oppositional position by rejecting AI-generated content as a reliable basis for purchase decisions because they believed it diminished authenticity and could potentially mislead consumers.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that Generation Z's high level of digital literacy does not automatically translate into unconditional acceptance of technological innovations in digital marketing. Instead, their ability to recognize AI-generated characteristics encourages them to critically evaluate the credibility of information sources before making purchasing decisions. Consequently, the effectiveness of digital marketing communication depends not only on the

sophistication of the technology employed but also on the extent to which promotional content maintains audience trust through transparency and authentic product representation.

Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis of AI-Generated Affiliate Content

Consistent with Stuart Hall's Reception Theory (1973), audiences are regarded as active participants who construct meaning through the decoding process of media messages. Hall categorizes audience interpretations into three reading positions: the dominant-hegemonic position, the negotiated position, and the oppositional position. Based on the in-depth interviews conducted with the five informants, the findings indicate that these reception positions did not emerge equally. The majority of informants occupied the oppositional position, while a smaller proportion demonstrated the negotiated position. Notably, none of the informants were classified within the dominant-hegemonic position.

a. Dominant-Hegemonic Position

The interview findings revealed that none of the five informants occupied the dominant-hegemonic position. According to Stuart Hall (1973), this position occurs when audiences fully accept the dominant meaning encoded by the message producer without negotiation or resistance. Within the context of this study, such a position would indicate complete acceptance of AI-generated affiliate content as authentic, trustworthy, and capable of accurately representing fashion products for purchase decision-making.

However, all informants demonstrated a more critical attitude toward the use of AI. Although several acknowledged that AI can produce visually appealing content, accelerate content production, and improve efficiency for affiliate marketers, none regarded AI-generated content as a sufficient basis for trusting a promoted product. Instead, all participants felt the need to seek additional evidence through organic videos, consumer reviews, or testimonials from actual users before making purchasing decisions.

The absence of the dominant-hegemonic position suggests that Generation Z, as digital natives, possesses relatively high levels of digital literacy and therefore does not passively accept visual messages produced through AI technology. Rather, they are capable of recognizing AI-generated visual characteristics, understanding the potential for information manipulation, and verifying promotional claims independently. These findings indicate that advances in AI technology do not automatically increase consumer trust, particularly in the fashion sector, where authentic visual representation is essential.

These findings are also consistent with the concept of User-Generated Content (UGC), which argues that user-created content is generally perceived as more trustworthy because it reflects genuine experiences and appears more authentic than conventional advertising (Morrison et al., 2013). Although affiliate-generated content serves commercial purposes, audiences still expect affiliate marketers to provide authentic product experiences that establish credibility. When these authentic experiences are replaced by AI-generated visual representations, the

perceived authenticity of the content declines, resulting in Generation Z's rejection of the dominant meaning intended by affiliate marketers.

The absence of a dominant-hegemonic reading further reinforces the overall findings of this study, indicating that AI-generated affiliate content has not successfully established the preferred meaning intended by its creators. Instead, most participants adopted an oppositional reading, while a smaller number engaged in negotiated readings. This demonstrates that Generation Z's decoding process is influenced primarily by personal experience, digital literacy, and the desire for authentic information rather than passive acceptance of AI-generated promotional messages.

b. Negotiated Position

Two informants (Informants 2 and 5) were classified within the negotiated position. According to Stuart Hall (1973), this position emerges when audiences partially accept the dominant meaning conveyed by media while simultaneously adapting it according to their own experiences, needs, and values. In other words, audiences neither fully accept nor completely reject the message but selectively embrace aspects they consider relevant.

This perspective was reflected in how Informants 2 and 5 interpreted AI-generated fashion promotional content. Informant 2 considered AI acceptable when used only to create attention-grabbing opening sequences (hooks), while believing that the remainder of the content should rely on human creativity. Similarly, Informant 5 acknowledged that AI could improve visual appeal when employed solely as a supporting tool for adjusting lighting, enhancing backgrounds, or performing visual editing without altering the original appearance of the promoted product. Within this context, AI was viewed as an acceptable technology because it enhanced aesthetic quality while preserving the authenticity of product information.

Nevertheless, both Informants 2 and 5 remained critical of the complete replacement of human representation by AI. They argued that fully AI-generated promotional videos often appear unrealistic, unnatural, and incapable of accurately representing the true characteristics of fashion products. Consequently, even when AI-generated content appeared visually attractive, they did not immediately trust it. Instead, they sought additional evidence through organic videos, reviews from other consumers, and testimonials from actual users before making purchasing decisions. This demonstrates that their acceptance of AI was selective rather than unconditional.

Their negotiated position also became evident when comparing AI-generated content with organic affiliate content. Both participants accepted AI as a technological innovation capable of improving promotional content. Informant 2 suggested that AI could effectively be used to create visually engaging hooks, while the main content should continue to feature real human presenters to preserve creativity. Informant 5 similarly believed that AI should be limited to supporting brainstorming, idea generation, concept development, script writing, and caption creation. However, both rejected the use of AI as a complete substitute for authentic human representation of products. Thus, AI was accepted as a production support

tool rather than a replacement for genuine human experiences in presenting fashion products.

These findings suggest that technology acceptance is not necessarily dichotomous but often reflects a compromise between technological benefits and the need for authentic information. This interpretation aligns with Stuart Hall's (1973) concept of the negotiated position, whereby audiences generally accept the media's preferred meaning while adapting it according to their own experiences and circumstances. In this study, Informants 2 and 5 accepted AI as an innovation capable of improving visual quality, facilitating brainstorming, and attracting audience attention, yet continued to require authentic evidence before trusting promotional information and making purchasing decisions. They also emphasized the importance of balancing AI-assisted production with genuine human creativity.

These findings further support Huang and Rust's (2021) conceptualization of Artificial Intelligence in digital marketing, which views AI primarily as a technology that enhances production efficiency and creates more engaging digital experiences. The perspectives of Informants 2 and 5 indicate that AI remains acceptable when employed as a supporting tool for brainstorming, visual editing, and aesthetic enhancement rather than replacing authentic human experiences entirely. Therefore, acceptance of AI depends not on the presence of the technology itself but on the extent to which it preserves authentic product representation.

c. Oppositional Position

In contrast to the two informants who adopted more balanced perspectives, Informants 1, 3, and 4 clearly occupied the oppositional position. These participants understood the intended purpose of AI in affiliate marketing content—to improve production efficiency, reduce costs, accelerate content creation, and produce visually appealing promotional materials. Nevertheless, they actively rejected this preferred meaning because they believed AI diminished the authenticity that is fundamental to fashion product promotion.

For this group, authentic human experience represents the essential element for establishing trust in promotional content. They argued that the relationship between affiliate marketers and consumers is built upon genuine product experiences; therefore, AI-generated representations undermine the affiliate marketer's primary role as an authentic product reviewer. Consequently, they preferred to rely on organic videos, consumer reviews, and testimonials from actual users before making purchasing decisions. Informants 1 and 4 even reported immediately skipping AI-generated content because they perceived it as dishonest, lacking genuine effort, and potentially misleading consumers.

These findings reinforce the role of affiliate marketers as communicators within digital marketing communication. Campbell and Farrell (2020) argued that affiliate marketers do not merely promote products but also establish relationships with audiences through authentic and personal experiences. Likewise, Lou and Yuan (2019) emphasized that affiliate credibility is largely determined by audience perceptions of honesty, expertise, and genuine product experience. Consequently, when AI completely replaces authentic human representation, affiliate marketers

become less credible because audiences perceive the absence of firsthand product experience.

From Stuart Hall's perspective, audiences occupying the oppositional position understand the intended meaning encoded by the message producer but reject that interpretive framework and construct their own alternative understanding. This pattern was evident among the three informants, who did not oppose AI as a technological innovation but rejected its use as a substitute for authentic human representation in fashion promotional content. As a result, their decoding process generated meanings directly opposed to those intended by the content creators.

Overall, Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis demonstrates that Generation Z's interpretations of AI-generated affiliate content for fashion products on Shopee are predominantly characterized by the oppositional position. Among the five informants, three (Informants 1, 3, and 4) occupied the oppositional position, while two (Informants 2 and 5) demonstrated negotiated readings. None of the participants exhibited a dominant-hegemonic reading.

This distribution indicates that the majority of Generation Z participants did not simply accept the meanings constructed by affiliate marketers through AI-generated promotional content. Rather than trusting AI-generated visuals, they questioned the authenticity, credibility, and accuracy of the promoted products. These findings underscore that Generation Z's relatively high level of digital literacy encourages more critical decoding of media messages, particularly within fashion product promotions, where authentic visual representation is fundamental to establishing consumer trust and influencing purchase decisions. Accordingly, Stuart Hall's Reception Theory effectively explains that audience interpretations do not necessarily correspond to the meanings intended by message producers but are instead shaped by individuals' experiences, knowledge, and social contexts.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study demonstrates that Generation Z tends to interpret Artificial Intelligence (AI)-generated affiliate content promoting fashion products on Shopee in a critical manner. Most informants perceived that AI has not yet been able to authentically represent fashion products, thereby influencing both consumer trust and purchase decisions. Based on Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis, three informants were categorized within the oppositional position, while two occupied the negotiated position. Notably, none of the informants demonstrated a dominant-hegemonic position. These findings suggest that Generation Z's relatively high level of digital literacy encourages them to verify promotional information before trusting AI-generated content (Long & Magerko, 2020; Hall, 1980). Furthermore, the findings indicate that the successful implementation of AI in marketing is determined not only by technological efficiency but also by the ability of promotional content to establish consumer trust while preserving the authenticity of the information presented (Huang & Rust, 2021).

Based on these findings, the use of AI in affiliate marketing content should not replace the entire process of product representation. Instead, AI should be utilized as a supporting tool to enhance visual quality while maintaining the authenticity of

the promoted products. This study is limited by its relatively small number of informants and its exclusive focus on fashion products within the Shopee platform, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve a more diverse group of participants, compare multiple e-commerce platforms, or examine different product categories to develop a more comprehensive understanding of public reception toward AI-generated promotional content.

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